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Ide, George Edward

Idealism and action

[New York]

[1916]

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IDEALISM AND ACTION

BY

GEORGE E. IDE

PRESIDENT OF THE HOME LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED

AT THE

EIGHTH ANNUAL CONVENTION

OF

THE HOME LIFE AGENCY ASSOCIATION

NEW YORK, JANUARY 11 AND 12, 1916

14 Feb 1916 MS

IDEALISM AND ACTION.

In writing on the political development of the United States from the end of the Revolutionary War to the adoption of the Federal Constitution, John Fiske describes this as the "Critical Period of American History." The struggle during these momentous years, 1783 to 1789, as you well know, resulted in the formation, out of discordant factions, of the Federal Union, which has been properly described as "the finest specimen of constructive statesmanship that the world has ever seen." The historian, who in the future reviews the years in which we are now living, will have good reason to describe the present as the "Critical Period of the *World's* History," and fortunate indeed will the human race be if out of the present chaos some scheme of constructive statesmanship of universal application be evolved which shall solve the fearful problems now confronting us. It is not my intention, however, to discuss the present situation as affecting the nations of the world, but to endeavor to call attention to some fundamental truths of value to the individual in the present crisis which we are apt to lose sight of when the "seas are calm and the azure skies serene."

First of all it must be remembered that we were originally a nation of "idealists": that this country was settled by "idealists,"

men who came here in order to be able to put in practice their ideals without governmental restraint; that it was developed by "idealists"; that the war which initiated our independence was fought by "idealists"; that the great Federation of these United States was conceived and put into operation by "idealists," and that our growth as a nation has been aided and accelerated by the introduction of foreigners who came to us of their own free will because they believed that this idealistic government offered to them greater opportunity for personal development, under a certain guarantee of individual freedom, than could be found in any other nation of the world.

No American need, therefore, be ashamed to call himself an idealist. Why is it that the word "ideal" has, however, in its general acceptance come to carry with it a certain shade of meaning which makes the man of true virility view it with an indefinable suspicion and rather resent its unqualified application to himself? Is it not because we have lost the original meaning of the word as describing that which is conceived as a standard of excellence or ultimate object of attainment, and substituted its secondary or more narrow meaning as that which exists *only* in the fancy or the imagination? Let us confine ourselves to its original significance.

In these days one need not apologize if he applies himself to serious questions on an occasion like this. In fact, it seems natural and necessary to do so. Last year I spoke to you of the "Lesson of the Hour." This year the situation is even more complex than it was at that time. What is the lesson of *this* hour? Every true man, as well as every nation, must have, as the basis of his philosophy of life, some underlying fundamental principles which make up his

creed. These are not the same in all individuals and they certainly are not the same in all nations. But it is not enough simply to have a creed, nor is it enough for one to rehearse that creed to himself. The man and the nation must have a purpose in life, but that is not sufficient. As one writer has recently said: "It behooves every high spirited individual or nation to be both strong and purposeful. Strength without high purpose is soulless and brutal. Purpose without strength is unreal and impotent." It is useless to have high ideals unless we couple with these ideals action on an equally high plane.

During the last few years there has been conflict between "vested interests" or business and our government, which conflict has led to the extension of governmental control of business activities and to governmental investigation of business management. This period of change has led to many acts of real injustice. It has checked our national development in many directions which are necessary to success. It has caused the abandonment of many lines of business organization which, if properly conducted, would have resulted in good to all classes. It has rendered Labor more suspicious and Capital more cautious than ever before, and this state of affairs was for the most part avoidable.

The fault cannot all be laid to the legislator and the committee-man, who felt forced to act quickly upon matters about which they knew but little. The public demanded action, and why? Because the honest men of high ideals in business had allowed greed, corruption and evil acts to be perpetrated in conspicuous instances by others without even entering verbal protest against the introduction of such

methods, and that, too, notwithstanding the fact that the overwhelming majority of men in control of business were, as they must of necessity be, men of high ideals, of commercial integrity and honor. Take a specific instance in our own business,—the baneful practice of compulsory annual dividends would never have been forced upon us if the men who recognized the evils which had crept into life insurance through the abuse of the deferred dividend system had years ago courageously registered their united protest and taken steps to insist that the evil should be restrained by wise and necessary limitations. This was not a popular stand to take in the ten years which preceded the insurance investigation, as we well know who were connected with the "Home" at that time. What was the result? The whole plan of deferred dividends was abolished and annual accountings and distribution of surplus demanded. How could men who had not previously opposed the system hope to obtain a respectful hearing when, after voluntary silence for many years, they appeared before the reform legislator and asked for less drastic action? They were passive idealists.

The views of the honest manager of a railroad or industrial corporation carry little weight with the Congressional Committee before which he appears, because having known and appreciated for years that abuses were creeping in, he did not then openly and manfully insist upon a change, but was content to allow matters to drift until public indignation swept the whole system off its feet. Not only did these men miss the opportunity of correcting abuses quietly and gradually from within but they lost forever the chance of being recognized by the government as sound advisers in the work of reorganization and readjustment which is now going on. They were men of ideals without action.

We believe that our Nation stands for high ideals, for lofty conceptions of national honor, for individual freedom and for the sacredness of contracts, whether between individuals or nations. It is not necessary to imagine for a moment that entrance into war would have been the consequence if, at the very start, not months afterwards, we had as a nation expressed ourselves clearly as opposed to any act on the part of any nation which was contrary to the *underlying* principles upon which our national life is based. We can never hope to be the arbiters between these warring nations after having remained silent at that most crucial moment. Such a course has created a false impression as to our intellectual honesty, and is making our present situation difficult and critical.

Idealists who are dumb when crises arise may be justly classed, under the second definition, as those whose ideals exist *only* in the fancy and the imagination.

When the present war is over, however it may be decided, there will be tremendous questions presented to us upon the proper solution of which our future as citizens and individuals will depend. In fact, some of these problems must be met and answered now. We cannot all hope to have the same degree of intellectual ability and foresight to apply in this crisis, but every man can and must make a careful inventory of his own stock of sound principles. In these times the value of true individual liberty, of honesty and fair dealing, of the integrity of contracts, of all these fundamental verities, must be realized as never before. We can as individuals only shape our course correctly by these standards. As a nation, it is vital for our own salvation that we should, as never before, be well grounded in

those magnificent and enduring truths which form the basis of our national existence and which were the guiding and compelling forces that made this Federation of States a possibility. But that is not all. Idealists we must be if we are to be worthy of our noble heritage, but above and beyond that we must supplement our creed by righteous action. We must not be afraid to affirm and maintain these principles. There can be no lasting improvement in our condition as individuals, no rehabilitation of the loss of prestige which has befallen business interests, no raising of our nation to the place we should occupy as the world's leader in sound ethics, and the champion of true liberty unless every one of us appreciates that his creed must be sound and his action consistent with that creed. We have had too much of high-sounding platitudes. What we need now in every department of our individual and national activity is a forceful and unwavering expression in our daily lives that we intend to stand by those principles unmindful, if need be, of temporary advantage or material self-interest.

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